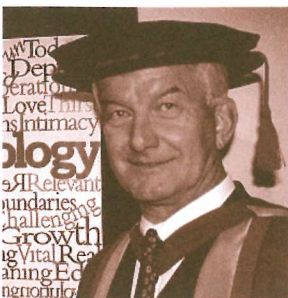


# THE CHURCH AND DEAF PEOPLE

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**IT IS NOT EASY TO DEFINE THE DEAF COMMUNITY.<sup>1</sup> MOST HEARING PEOPLE IN SOCIETY VIEW DEAFNESS SIMPLY AS A DISABILITY; OTHERS CONCENTRATE ON THE VIEW THAT DEAF PEOPLE ARE A "CULTURAL" MINORITY GROUP AND USE THIS AS THE PRIMARY DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC.** But classifying people as "deaf" can alienate them from others, and, similarly, classifying them as "disabled" can result in separation, stigmatisation and patronising attitudes that can have a crippling effect on the lives of impaired people, i.e. they are further disabled by the non-inclusive processes of society.<sup>2</sup>

Society and the Church, in dealing with difference inappropriately, have often deprived deaf people of their dignity. Within the Church our challenge is to reflect theologically on deaf people's experience of Church and work towards a perspective of humanity that does not allow for institutionalised discrimination. It is necessary for us to differentiate ourselves from that which is "other" in order to define ourselves, but an appropriate ecclesiology for deaf people will protect them from the negative effects of such differentiation and the inevitable suffering and alienation this brings. Drawing on Jürgen Moltmann's theology, this article reflects on how the Church can be a healing community not only by encouraging compassion, care and help but also by involving itself in the process of "breaking the power of the perspective of the dominant".<sup>3</sup>

Moltmann is a theologian who is passionately concerned for all people. He has a particular affinity with oppressed and marginalised groups, especially those who have suffered the disabling effects of the discriminatory practices of the Church and society. He stresses the personal dignity of all persons, disabled or non-disabled and their right to self-determination. He challenges and confronts the common view of disabled people that simply categorises them as lacking something. He does not deny the fact that people with impairments may not have all the abilities of able people but focuses instead on the incompleteness of all humanity. He stresses the value that all people, disabled or otherwise, bring to the Church.

Moltmann's emphasis on our need for "openness" in our views and attitudes towards others leads to a liberating understanding of the Church. He does not provide a model of the Church, but asks us to view the Church in the perspective of the kingdom of God, his intention being to provoke us to develop our own holistic understanding of what it is *to be* and *to be church*.



In the Gospels, we see Christ not only healing and helping disabled people but also accepting all people as “persons in their own right”.

## LANGUAGE

Deaf people have a sensory impairment but usually do not want to be defined *first and foremost* as disabled. For them, the main issue is one of language. They “should be primarily regarded as a cultural and language minority group rather than as individuals with an audiological disability. [Their] experiences often overlap with the experiences of hearing minority group members but at other times are unique.”<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 50,000 people in the UK – that’s just about 1 in 1000 people – use sign language as their first language or preferred means of communication. But they often lack basic background information about community services and access to adequate interpreting facilities. They also face communication difficulties because of the cultural and linguistic divide that exists between hearing and deaf people – the way in which the brain deals with sign language, because it is spatial and visual, is different from the way in which the brain deals with spoken and written language.<sup>5</sup> Loneliness and misunderstanding are thus common problems, as are unhelpful attitudes that stem from ignorance of what it means to be deaf.

Moltmann does not offer a “system” in his distinctive approach to theology. Rather, he suggests possibilities that provide theological ways and theological forms.<sup>6</sup> His theological concepts have an *eschatological focus* and he uses *dynamic, relational categories* and *perspectives* which function as hermeneutical tools for interpreting and understanding reality. His approach is to provoke thought and dialogue by the *suggestion of possibilities*. He often uses metaphor in a creative iconic way within a relational perspective to create theological concepts.

This approach has parallels with the way deaf people use *metaphorical iconicity* in sign language and in their conceptualisation process.<sup>7</sup> Some signs function as iconic metaphors for reality and deaf people often creatively combine iconic signs and sign-metaphors within a relational perspective to establish meaning, develop concepts and make sense of their lives.

## OPPRESSION AND SUFFERING

Many deaf people do not consider their *lack of hearing* causes them suffering. On the contrary, they frequently view those who do not use sign language as suffering because of their inability to appreciate the eloquence, beauty and power of deaf sign language. However, many deaf people suffer from discrimination arising from the attitudes of hearing people.

It is a sad fact that well-meaning people have sometimes acted in unhelpful ways. Inappropriate practices have often resulted in oppressive relationships and sadly this has occurred as much in the Church as in society generally. Serious problems can occur when a hearing society makes well intentioned but inappropriate interventions in the lives of disabled people. An example of horrific proportions was the “oral” approach to education using communication by voice and lip-reading only without the use of sign language. It was the main cause of the under-achievement, abuse and oppression of deaf people for generations until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

Like many oppressed people, deaf people are often afraid that they might suffer the use of force. It has been used in the past and it may be used again. It is a *perspective* of fear of force that oppresses them. This can be more powerful than the actual use of force. The oppressed remain oppressed because they adopt a perspective that considers the use of force against them a real possibility.

On a practical level, deaf people can feel alienated by the failure to check whether a hearing-aid loop system is working properly. Most people with hearing loss in church congregations are likely to be over sixty-five and hearing-aid users. Up to one in three people over that age have a hearing loss sufficiently severe to justify them being issued with a hearing aid. It’s worth checking that your church loop system works by asking the people who use it. Even the best system is of no value if it is not switched on or set at the wrong level!

There are numerous suggestions for practical ways in which churches can help deaf people. A few of the many useful websites are listed at the end of this article.

Many Christians would agree we should provide for the relief of people’s immediate needs but also look at the structures of societies’ institutions to see where they could be improved. In both society and the Church we have become more aware in recent years of the indirect causes of problems associated with disability and some people now encourage actions and attitudes that “include” rather than “exclude” disabled people. We need to act sensitively, however, as it is still very easy to stigmatise disabled people and diminish their sense of self-worth. In the Gospels, we see Christ not only healing and helping disabled people but also accepting all people as “persons in their own right”.

## NOTES

1 JG Kyle & B Woll, *Sign Language: The Study of Deaf People and Their Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See Chapter 1 for their excellent summary of the issues involved.

2 See M Oliver, *Understanding Disability* (London: MacMillan Press, 1996), Chapter 1.

3 R Bauckham, “Eschatology in *The Coming of God*” in R Bauckham (ed.), *God Will be All in All. The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 28.

4 I Parasnis (ed.), *Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), inside front cover and frontispiece.

5 I cover this important aspect of sign language in more detail in my book, *The Church and Deaf People: A Study of Identity, Communication and Relationships with Special Reference to the Ecclesiology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

6 For Moltmann’s description of his theological method, see his recent work, J Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology. Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2000).

7 Sign language is as able as any other language to convey complex abstract concepts as can be seen at Gallaudet College of Higher Education in the USA where it is the first language among the students studying there to degree level and beyond. Further details about the college can be found at the website address <http://www.gallaudet.edu/>. For a fuller discussion of the similarities between sign language and Moltmann’s theological method, see my book, *The Church and Deaf People* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

8 H Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence. Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 113.

9 Müller-Fahrenholz has said, rightly I believe, that Moltmann’s “... theology of history is based in messianic mysticism”.

G Müller-Fahrenholz, *The Kingdom and the Power. The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (London: SCM Press, 2000), p. 241.



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### ►LIBERATION

All oppressed peoples face not only the problem of how to cope with or overcome oppression, but also of how to maintain a Christian response to their oppressors. Moltmann's view also offers liberation to the oppressors. By transforming our view of death, which is the ultimate alienation, it loses its power over us. Moltmann emphasises a *tentativeness* concerning our own understanding of reality which encourages us to reach out towards that which is "other". By stressing the *dialectical* and *interdependent* nature of our being he encourages us to have an *attitude of openness* towards other people and ideas. His ecclesiology can also help deaf people to cross social and ecclesiastical boundaries and interact with other traditions because it stresses ecumenicity and encourages dialogue with those of different denominations and faiths. It also makes this approach more possible by theologically addressing the fears of loss that normally hinder such approaches. He emphasises the value of direct personal action as well as political action that can challenge the perspective of those who dominate to confront and prevent oppressive practices that arise from harmful attitudes towards disability.

When we see great need, our Christian love will impel us to act. My grandfather, who was deaf, received much in the way of practical help through the Deaf Welfare workers in the early decades of the last century, and through the activity of the Salvation Army. In the context of the poverty that many "working class" families like his experienced in the 1920s and 1930s, where there was sometimes no money for the day's food or shoes for children, practical Christian loving care often made a significant difference to people's lives. Help for deaf people has been directed towards education, employment and religious welfare.

Moltmann views people in hierarchical relationships as being particularly vulnerable to the abuse of power. He views relationships within the Trinity as being non-hierarchical and considers that these are a model for all relationships. They are characterised by openness and faithfulness and revealed by a process of promise and fulfilment. In his view, non-hierarchical relationships between Christians open to the possibilities of the future are one sign of the Church and a demonstration of the kingdom of God. Moltmann sees status as a way of acknowledging difference rather than a measure of superiority that can result in domination. We should not therefore judge another person as being of less value because they appear to be poor or seem to be lacking

something that makes them different. We may even be surprised to find that they are actually able to enrich us.

By viewing our lives from the *perspective* provided by an awareness of the eschaton, the fear that arises from people misusing and abusing power will be recognised by us as only temporary and therefore limited in its power to affect us.

### POLITICS

Moltmann often views *power* as a political matter and he sees it as important that Christians involve themselves in the political process. Disability is a political matter, for it is through politics, as well as religion that the norms and standards of our society are established and maintained. If we are serious about working to improve the lives of disabled people we will be politically active, at one level or another and so liberation can occur in this life as well as in the life to come.

Ignorance and misrepresentation will always be with us, like "the poor". Confronting fear and encouraging hope, in the midst of this process, will be a task to which the church must continually apply itself.

### CONCLUSION

Moltmann's theology is a perspective-changing theology. His vision is mystical, based on the love of God, which can provide a liberating perspective for all who will enter into that love relationship with him. He is the God who is beyond our understanding, yet reveals aspects of himself to us as we follow him in his way and these can lead us to liberating action. It is also a prophetic mysticism because it is active and leads others to action as they adopt its perspective.<sup>9</sup> For Moltmann, it is that action, whether it is political, social or economic, which is a partial revelation of the kingdom of God and it is in that action that we find the person of Jesus Christ and his Church. It is that liberating action that results in the "breaking of the power of the perspective of the dominant" in both our Church and in our society. ■

For information on practical matters see, for example, information provided by:

"Hands Together" – [www.jireh.demon.co.uk](http://www.jireh.demon.co.uk)

CDL UK – [www.deafchristian.org.uk](http://www.deafchristian.org.uk)

British Deaf Association – [www.britishdeafassociation.org.uk](http://www.britishdeafassociation.org.uk)

National Deaf Children's Society – [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)

Royal National Institute for the Deaf – [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

United Kingdom Council on Deafness – [www.deafcouncil.org.uk](http://www.deafcouncil.org.uk)